

3 June 1989

20,000 complaints about ivory trade received in Britain

From DAVID WALLEN
in London

MORE than 20,000 complaints about the ivory trade centred in Hongkong have been received in Britain by the organisation calling for a ban on the industry.

The complaints are now being put together in a petition to be presented to the British Government before the meeting of European Community (EC) environment ministers in Luxembourg on Thursday.

The British Government will call for a ban on the trade at the EC meeting.

Yesterday the Ivory Trade Review Group, which is funded by the World Wide Fund for Nature, the organisation collating the complaints, warned that the African elephant was dying out more rapidly than previously thought and could be extinct within 15 years.

The elephant population of Africa has fallen from 750,000 in 1987 to 625,000 today according to the latest estimates by the group.

It claimed the poaching epidemic in Africa had reduced elephant numbers by at least half in the past 10 years.

Of those remaining 45 per cent are to be found in the rain forests of central Africa, 31 per cent in southern Africa, 21 per cent in east Africa and only three per cent in west Africa.

The killing of bull elephants for their ivory had been so intense that in some areas there were only 99 females to one male.

The smallest increase in the rate of slaughter would halve these populations within seven years.

The group called for pressure to be brought on the world's main ivory importers, including Hongkong, Japan and China to observe a worldwide ban.

It also demanded an immediate ban on the ivory trade to prevent a surge of poaching before countries like Britain ban the trade later this year.

Mr George Medley, director of the UK section of the World Wide Fund for Nature, said: "We are asking every jeweller in every high street to remove ivory from their windows today.

"No one wants to play any part in what could become an elephant holocaust and unless all nations act now, there will be an enor-

mous surge in poaching and smuggling."

Following the June 8 move the next step towards a worldwide ban on the ivory trade could come at a conference on animal conservation at Lausanne in Switzerland in October.

British Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher told the Commons last month: "We really believe that the sale in new ivory should be stopped altogether."

The move followed increasing concern in Britain at the extent of the trade - estimated to be worth US\$50 million (HK\$390 million) a year in Hongkong alone - and the way it is threatening the extinction of the African elephant.

Limited trade is allowed under the Convention of International Trade in Endangered Species of Wild Fauna and Flora if it can be proved the ivory came from legal sources.

But conservationists have been pressing Britain to try and get the African elephant moved up to a list in Annex One of the convention, which limits trade in the animals to the exchange of live beasts for breeding.